First Night Joys and Some of the Peculiarities of First Nighters

The "Death Watch," the Club Corner Deity and the Lover of "Stage Society" are Component Parts, Says an Expert, of That Noble Army Which Is Now Gathered in Full Force Only on Occasions of Extraordinary Interest.

"WELL, HOW WAS IT?"

"LOTTIE TALCUM HAS TEMPURMENT."

FIRST nights and first nighters in this city are like some other things—they are not what they used to be. Either one's zest for them has abated or the conditions surrounding theatrical performances in general have so altered that much of the romance and attractiveness have been squeezed out of them. Then again, theatrical business has increased so much of late years that dates of decided importance are found to clash, so the noble army of first nighters, formerly so united, is scattered in two or even three directions. It has come about, therefore, that only an event of singular interest will secure the attendance of the whole tribe, including the famous "death watch."

First nighters are of two kinds—amateurs and professionals. The professional first nighters include the critics, those patient bearers of many strange burdens, a mass of out-of-town correspondents—"correspondent" being an elastic and comprehensive term—of the actors or actresses who are not employed that particular evening and of those managers whose duty it is to keep themselves informed as to the progress of theatrical happenings, whether auspicious or disastrous.

The amateur first nighters are those who make a practice of being seen and heard at every possible opening. Their features are as familiar as those of the accredited critics. Many of these amateur first nighters live, move and have their being in that strange, well dressed, well-to-do world which takes delight in hanging about the fringe of theatrical society, and two or three of whom are to be found patiently or impatiently tolerated in the suite of every actor and actress of prominence and reputation. These folk are more theatrical than the theatricians themselves.

Others are rich bachelors or club corner deities who find supreme pleasure in the ephemeral authority given to them by their power to answer the far-flung question, "How was it?" that being the approved way of demanding expert information respecting the initial performance of a play. The answer is usually couched in one of several formulæ, knowledge of which causes the habitue of the theatre, the amateur critic and first nighter to be regarded with great awe among those who are quite ready to acknowledge their vast inferiority to a man who has actually assisted, as the French say, at the first presentation of "The Taxicab Girl," or "The Undercurrent," or "The Deluge," or "The Rapids," or "The Gulf Stream," or "Lord Bediver's Dilemma," or even "Nellie Gray, the Beautiful Sewing Girl."

Such a man does not give an extended and didactic answer to the undying question, "How was it?" but he gives the right answer in the right and locally impressive dialect. This in itself is a feat. Such a man—let us at least be euphemistic—eschews the vocabulary of a Horace or a Boileau. He avoids the style of M. Francisque Sarcey as being too literary even if vivacious. Such a man is epigrammatic, monosyllabic, but decisive and effective. He will say in answer to the "How was it?" "Punk" or "Rotten." If not amused, he will say, "Oh, so-and-so," which is blasé, almost bohemian. His lexicon of eulogy is equally elegant and equally expressive. If he has been really pleased he will reply, "A hit," or "They have put one over," or "A go," or "Immense," or "Will run into the hot weather."

He has heard these phrases issuing from the mouths of theatrical folk, and using them glibly and lightly, he finds that they make a reputation for him—in his particular circle; but a reputation is a reputation, however small the circle. His critical estimates of particular performers are couched in the same agreeable esoteric dialect. He will say "Lottie Talcum runs away with the third act," or "The author did not mean it, but it's Kitty Beresford's play"; or "She has tempurment, but it does not get over the footlights." He would also tell you something about that which he calls "persnality"—"persnality and tempurment!" Woe to the actress who does not possess these mysterious things. They are vague, but nowadays they are terribly necessary, standing in default of much training and in the place of much talent.

Some amateur first nighters will be philosophical enough to discuss the difficult points as to whether the "tempurment and persnality" of this or that actress are suited to such an such a part. It is axiomatic, for example, that the "tempurment and persnality" of Miss Marie Dressler are unsuited to the role of Ophelia and those of Miss Mary Shaw are most suited to "intellectual parts," whatever the word "intellectual" in this connection can possibly mean. But it would be regarded as tedious, metaphysical and unclubby to go into matters more deeply than this, and it is because this particular type of first nighter is neither tedious nor metaphysical, but is, on the contrary, so condensed, so idiomatic and so sure of himself that he possesses such unbounded influence—in his particular circle.

I have referred to the "death watch." The "death watch" consists of the type of first nighter above described, but grown either old or become embittered. It is the peculiarity of the "death watch" that it dearly loves a failure, and it has been actually known to provoke one. After a first act the grim vigilants march out into the lobby headed by its celebrated leader, famous in certain quarters of two continents for the startling beauty of his diamonds. They proceed to fortify themselves with whiskey and soda, and afterward to provoke the fluent working of their delicate imaginations with cigarettes.

Then they take out their jewelled hammers and the sweet anvil chorus begins—swelling or abating in the intervals between other and subsequent acts as the interest of the members of the "death watch" itself falls or rises. The peculiar and the dangerous thing about the "death watchers" is that they go to all kinds of first nights with cheerful and consistent indiscriminateness. They turn up at "The Taxicab Girl," and also at Ibsen's "Rosmersholm." Their leading principle is easily enunciated. It is simply, "Be there," and "Beware of us."

In taste, in education, in literary feeling, in love and admiration for the stage, for the good there is on the stage, the sentinels of the death watch are far from being above the level of the average auditor, but self-constituted and imperious as they are they have demanded the prerogatives of regular criticism and have actually contrived to exercise some sort of an influence—so much so that their lofty system of ethics and æsthetics has come to be regarded in certain quarters as a standard of theatrical selection.

A few years ago two of the most highly respected managers in New York attempted to exclude the death watch from their houses. It was a ticklish thing to do, because the death watch is rich, always pays for its seats, and is a good and generous patron of the theatre at all times and seasons. Nevertheless, the order went out that the privilege of purchasing aisle seats "'way down in front" for first nights was to be withheld gently but firmly from the death watch. Unfortunately for the success of this audacious enterprise, the death watch heard that a plan was afoot. It took immediate steps to secure united action. It resolved to fight for the principle of its existence and for the continuance of that existence, and to make a test case of the very next first night; nor did it hesitate to raise clamor and complaint concerning its grievances, so that the theatrical papers were for some days alive with its pathetic protests.

Unable to bend the managerial gods, the component parts of the death watch proceeded to stir up Acheron. They appealed to the speculators. They gave large sums to get aisle seats "'way down front." Surely enough, at the very next premiere, to the amused dismay of the managers, to the despair of the nervous actors, to the horror of the authors, the soldiers of the death watch were found installed in different but still equally prominent seats, a quiet smile of triumph lighting up what the poet Swinburne would have called "their imperishable faces."

The multiplicity and collision of first nights in this city has brought it about that a first night is no longer that which it used to be regarded—a responsive touchstone of popular opinion. I attended a few weeks ago the premiere of a sweetly lavendered and not unpoetical play which has justly succeeded in establishing itself as one of the successes of the current season. Yet when the curtain fell upon that graceful imagining the management must have been almost as much in the dark as regards the material prospects of its piece as it was a week or an hour before the curtain rose. Two-thirds of the recognized critics were away. The boxes were occupied by the "stars" in the employment of the management—for it was a week of rest—and the stalls were full of actors and actresses.

Now, the verdict of a theatrical audience is invariably "Not guilty," so no confidence is to be placed in the charitable tributes that such a warm hearted and genial presence pays to the fellow workers of its own craft. In other parts of the house there were in considerable numbers persons whose opinion, to judge by their physiognomy alone, could not be anything but worthless, whether favorable or unfavorable. The sole reason that they were there was the absolute or imagined necessity of having an audience and of filling the seats. There may have been in the whole auditory a half dozen men and women whose judgment could have any weight or whose prophecy could be of any guidance.

The privilege of attending a first night would indeed be great if the managers carefully selected their audience with a view of making it representative of the whole of New York life, of all those elements, varied, complex and contradictory as they are, which fuse together in that which may be called the patronage of the theatre. Such an attempt is not made, however, save in the most exceptional cases. It seems to have become customary to pack the theatre with the friends of the actors and of the enterprise. When this is done the uninitiated spectator, if he were to judge by the enthusiasm, the flowers, the speeches, the outbursts of applause at the moments at which applause is expected, or at least evidently hoped for, by the performers, would say that success was decided and inevitable. But at heart the enthusiasm, while kindly and not unnatural, is false. The flowers soon fade. The play has been heard by nothing but an amiable, irresponsible and voluntary claque.

At the opera it is quite different. There the admirable system of the French has been adopted. A new opera is invariably preceded, sometimes at an interval of days, by that which in Paris is called "répétition générale," being a full dress rehearsal before a full audience. A large audience is an important thing, even at a rehearsal, because an audience will always do half the acting and in the matter of the modern school, of personal and temperamental singing, must also think or imply some of the singing as well. These general rehearsals are the real opera first nights, and while the audiences that attend them are often large to overflowing, as well as highly representative, the general public has little the chance of invitation.

There are a piquancy and an attractiveness about these general rehearsals because the artists and their following who are not singing are in vigilant and critical attendance. In every opera house there are three schools of thought. These schools of thought have their representatives among the singers on the stage and in the audience. They can be referred to roughly as the French, the German and the Italian opinion. Furthermore, the audience, and even the preponderating American element in the audience, have pronounced tendencies in one or other of these directions.

There are as many factions in an opera audience as there were in the Roman circus, though the members of these factions have not as yet adopted the plain-spoken Roman fashion of wearing a color to denote their sympathies. So your new opera has the benefit of the verdict of a mixed tribunal, mixed as to nationality, as to taste, as to habit of thought and as to emotional outlook. In other words, such an audience is in its way an epitome of posterity, and therefore deserving of the closest study.

All first nights are occasions of general strain. In the theatre there is no such thing as certainty, no such thing as logic. The public is moody, capricious and uncertain, yet to build on any of its moods or caprices is to build upon quicksand. All those who have had experience of the theatre know all this only too well. It is the tragedy of management. You have often asked yourself as you have come discontentedly from a bad play how is it that a manager of intelligence could put on such rubbish? As a matter of fact, plays just as rubbishy as that one from which you have crept silently away have proved successes which you yourself might have been enabled to enjoy.

A manager shoots a dozen arrows, and one hits the mark. The ablest impresario can fail time and time again, and the men who have made the most failures are often the men who are the strongest managers. On the other hand, the stupidest can achieve the feat of the sportsman who had shot for day after day in a game preserve in Ireland. Unfortunately, he never bagged anything. At last he killed a brace of partridges. Turning to the gamekeeper with a sickly kind of smile, he said: "Well, I succeeded that time." The gamekeeper replied respectfully, "Yes, sir, it is marvellous how sometimes they will fly into it."

It is this element of chance, of accident, that makes the important first night a centre of attraction. Your first nighter feels himself to be a counter in a vast gamble, a chip in a bluff against the mood and whim of the public. He knows well that success turns upon a hair. He sees the balance swing this way, then that, and enjoys the variation and the suspense. He has seen triumph snatched from the jaws of defeat. He has seen the brilliant promise of three acts swamped in the morass of the fourth, and in the uncertainty and excitement of it all consists such charm and glamour as continue to linger in these theatrical premières.

No one who was present will ever forget the first time that Luisa Tetrazzini appeared at the Manhattan Opera House. I would venure to say that at that particular moment she was Oscar Hammerstein's last card, save that he has had so many since. But that night, at least, there was a general impression abroad not only that he relied on her to save his season, but that his season ought to be saved. The house was packed, and from the beginning was slightly over eager and hysterical. The first passages Mme. Tetrazzini sang were anything but reassuring. In the great gamble she was losing point after point, but when she did play her hand in its full strength the house went into a frenzy. She had indulged the popular love for a sensation; she had succeeded. Mr. Hammerstein's last card had won.

Strange that the gambling instinct in men should have found a place in the theatre, but so it has. And to the end of time the great game will be played, the cards being the talent, the genius, the heart, the soul and the moods of men and women and of that metaphysical combination of men and women called the public.

Do the critics feel the strain alluded to? Indeed they do. One of them, as human and kindly as he is versed and respected in his vocation, once told me that he never attended a first night without a sickening and almost disabling feeling of stage fright. Against this he usually fortified himself by the sensible expedient of an afternoon in bed.

Although the keenly personal note of the old days may be wanting now, and even though there are no real first nights in New York theatres any more, since all plays have a night or a week of tryout on the road, yet the myth of "fashion" and the genuine, though indescribable thrill of interest gather about the night when a play opens. For one reason or another, and through changing phases, the especial enthusiasm for first nights appears to be on the increase. Between the time of Genin, the hatter who paid $100 to hear Jenny Lind, and that of the genial man of the hour who pays $150 to hear Caruso, first night productions seem to have gone up a third in the market of general values.

Some 4,000 or 4,500 persons rushed to the Metropolitan Opera House on the night not long ago when Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West" was presented. And whereas the receipts of the house on a crowded night at regular subscription prices amount to about $11,000, the house brought in more than $32,000 on Puccini night, which indicates at least a threefold interest in the first performance. Ten dollar seats got the habit very early of selling for $25 and more, not that the management was responsible for this. The demand became so great that a large number of subscribers found it advantageous to pass on their privilege at a profit of $15 a seat to sidewalk ticket speculators. These got what they could, which was all the way from $150 down to $5, when the market broke.

The first night of "Parsifal" in this country brought the record crowd to the big opera house. Nearly five thousand persons jammed their way in, and $100 was not an uncommon offer for a single seat near the stage. But it does not require an "initial production" to create the first night furor at the Metropolitan. The opening performance of the season is almost as great a favorite. "Lohengrin" on the first night of grand opera in the fall is worth nine "Lohengrins" later on.

CYNICUS.

The Week's Who Zoo

By Vincent Towne. (Copyright, 1911, by the International Syndicate.)

THE india rubber man is no longer a favorite side show feature, but he is still the one indispensable functionary on the staff of the President of these United States of ours.

Last summer Mr. Taft captured a fine specimen of this rare species, whom he thought he had for keeps, but some private interests have just tempted him away with the long green bait. And so the hurry call went out, the other week:

"Wanted—A new india rubber man for Mr. Taft."

You haven't an idea of what it means to act as buffer between the chief servant of the people and his hundred million masters. No stuff other than india rubber can stand the strain, and Charles Dewey Hilles was recommended to the President as a man with vulcanized rubber bones, good springy rubber flesh and a disposition even springier.

You probably don't know Hilles, this man who will get all the blame for the disappointment of politicians who knock in vain at the Presidential door. A score and more times daily will he be the target for the sharp shafts of disgruntled politicians.

"It's all Hilles's fault! (Curses! Curses again! And likewise more curses!)"

Such will be the daily anvil chorus upon the lid of that little white box in which the Chief Magistrate hides from the unsuccessful officeseeker.

But Uncle Sam's new supply board will receive no requisition for an ice bag to adorn Hilles's left ear. It will not glow, for this new rubber man in the daily White House show is not a "sensitive" even when it comes to criticism communicated by psychic waves.

It is an interesting coincidence that this new secretary to the President had his early career shaped in the very same groove as that which put the first edge on George Bruce Cortelyou, the greatest of all Presidential secretaries. Each of these men served his time as a school teacher, and perhaps you can hit on no better initial training for the post of White House buffer, for what apprenticeship to the trade of handling cranks and irate officeseekers is superior, indeed, to the task of handling unruly schoolboys? And what better opportunity is there for studying the vagaries of human nature?

The new secretary passed his forty-third milestone last June, which makes him six years older than was Cortelyou when he became President McKinley's chief of office staff, in 1900. And by seven, eight and four years, respectively, is Hilles older than were Loeb, Carpenter and Norton when they assumed the same post.

CHARLES DEWEY HILLES.

Hilles is a Buckeye by birth and is not a college man. After earning his sheepskin in Barnesville, Ohio, he took two years of study at an institute in Oxford, Md. Then he went to work.

There was something ominous in the fact that his first actual job was that of private secretary. Thus he served the principal of an industrial school for street boys at Lancaster, Ohio. Here he took dictation for the morning mail, but while he plunked the typewriter keys he absorbed an altruistic desire to help the little waifs committed to the institution. Before he could realize his ambition to rise to the post of teacher, however, there came a change of administration in Ohio and the faculty of the school was displaced by men of the opposite political party.

So the young secretary went out with his chief, but only to return a couple of years later—not as stenographer and typist now, but as financial officer. And after serving in this new capacity for ten years he became superintendent of the school. That was in 1900, when he was thirty-three.

But the man of parts is always in demand. So a couple of years later, when a progressive superintendent was wanted for the New York Juvenile Asylum, on Manhattan Island, young Hilles was chosen for the place.

Such was his advent to the metropolis, while Theodore Roosevelt was putting in his first year at the White House.

An army of street waifs numbering 1,200 was under the young man's direct charge, and, besides, he had the guardianship of 600 more children in a Western agency which the institution maintained out in Chicago.

Advanced ideas at once crept into the asylum's management. It was moved to Dobbs Ferry, and was the first American institution to be subdivided into a model village. Separate houses, each maintained as a home for a small group of children, were built. More than a million dollars was expended on the enterprise, and the most advanced methods known to penologists were adopted. Hilles became a reformer of reform methods and the officer of several charitable and corrective societies.

Certainly, he could never have dreamed in these days of an entree into a political berth which might lead him directly to the Cabinet.

Some of the old tried politicians sniffed when they heard that President Taft had selected an "asylum keeper" for one of his political lieutenants. But the President knew of Hilles through the latter's Ohio connections, and had heard that he was a phenomenon when it came to executive ability. So the berth was offered, and Hilles became Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. That was a couple of years ago coming next East Week. As Assistant Secretary of the Treasury he has drawn $4,500 a year, but as secretary to the President will get $3,000 more a year, or $7,500.

This is $1,500 more a year than was allowed his predecessor. Congress was asked to raise the salary of the office from $6,000 to $10,000, but split the difference last month by fixing it at $7,500, the same as given a Senator and Representative.

Just as he has done for the last year, the President will still call "Charley" when he wants his secretary. And like his predecessor, Hilles is a "Charles D."

Those who have sounded him say that he contains as much good Cabinet timber as he does india rubber. Study his face and see if you don't find "leadership" written on it.